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ABSTRACT

This report provides information about how states identify schools that are not performing at expected levels and what some states have done to provide assistance in the improvement of these schools. Kentucky, North Carolina, and South Carolina share similarities in their approaches in that they spent time and effort in preparatory activities, developed comprehensive student testing systems that are highly correlated with state curriculum goals, and adopted a more rigorous standard of student performance than had been required under their previous testing systems. None rely exclusively on test scores for assessing schools. All schools rely on the expertise of educators from outside the low-performing school's home district to bring about improvements. All emphasize local capacity building as a primary ingredient in helping low-performing schools become successful. Policymakers need to be clear about the goals they set for school improvement, need to provide time for schools to bring about significant improvements, and support staff development. They can create strategies at the state, local, and school levels for bringing about school improvement, should recognize the value--but insufficiency--of short-term success, and recognize that school success rests on the power and skill of educators. (Contains 14 references.) (RT)

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Low-Performing Schools

So You've Identified Them—Now What?

David Holdzkom

States are moving aggressively to identify schools that are unable to provide an adequate education to students. Once these schools have been identified, efforts to bring about improvements are expected. State support to low-performing schools often takes the form of intensive assistance with assignment of external staff to work with the school, the support of professional development programs intended to improve teachers' skills, and assistance in identifying specific areas for improvement within the school. This report provides information about how states identify schools that are not performing at expected levels and what some states have done to provide assistance in the improvement of these schools.

Over the past decades, improvement of education has been a focus of the work of educators, researchers, and policymakers. Reform efforts have touched on virtually every aspect of schooling, including curricula, teaching, physical plants, nutrition, use of time, and use of peripheral teaching technologies such as television and computers.[1]

Within the past 10 years, these efforts have been increasingly characterized by two complementary ideas: systemic reform and standards-based education. Systemic reform essentially views education as a system that must be changed in *fundamental* ways if it is to continue to be successful. In this way of thinking, most *programmatic* changes, in and of themselves, may have immediate benefits but simply put off the needed long-term change in issues of school governance, resource allocation, and articulation of goals. Standards-based reformers, at the same time, have sought to re-define the quality of what is being taught so that a more rigorous curriculum is offered to all students. Standards related to the conditions of education have been articulated as well,

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thus attending to the envelope of schooling as well as the contents of the envelope. The standards-based reformers have had an enormous influence on how education policymakers and practitioners talk about the issues, contents, and results of education.[2]

Clearly, improvements based on systemic change and standards imply a fairly long trajectory of change. Systems of belief, tradition, and operation do not change quickly. The training to equip staff and leadership with understanding of new roles (such as shared governance structures), new beliefs (that the education of *all children* is important, for example), and new skills (e.g., those necessary for success in an information-rich world) cannot be provided in a short time. Michael Fullan states categorically that it takes about three years to achieve successful change in an elementary school and, depending on size, it takes about six years to do so in a secondary school.[3] In addition, the need to remediate the skills of students who have been in low-performing schools and classes takes time. William Sanders has demonstrated that the effects of poor teaching for even one year can be seen up to four years later.[4]

Improving Outcomes for Low-Performing Schools in the Southeast

An important source of information about what states are doing to improve the quality of education is provided by the publishers of *Education Week*. For the past several years, the editors of this periodical have surveyed the states on a number of topics related to education quality and reform efforts and have published this information for a wide audience of educators, policymakers, and the general public. The most recent report, *Quality Counts 2001: A Better Balance*, was examined for information specifically related to states' efforts to identify and improve low-performing schools.

Data from the report are tabulated in Table 1.[5] Information about the states in the southeastern quadrant of the nation has been highlighted. These states share many characteristics, among which are traditions of highly centralized education systems; large proportions of poverty among the population; and, until fairly recent years, an economy that is largely rural. Moreover, these states typically provide a higher level of funding for local schools than do many other states. It is interesting to observe that, for most aspects of school ratings and their consequences as displayed, these states are about as likely as those in other parts of the country to assign school ratings, but are far more likely to sanction and to provide assistance to schools identified as low performing.

Patterns of Success

Patterns of successful practice may be seen by examining three states that have implemented programs designed to assess schools and then to provide assistance to the neediest schools. The three states chosen are not offered as perfect models that other states should follow. Rather, these southeastern states have all been evaluating school performance for several years and have made some major changes in their assessment and accountability systems based on their experiences. In addition to identifying low-performing schools, these states have developed strategies for helping these schools improve. This does not make them unique. Many states have used staff external to the low-performing school, a careful needs assessment procedure, and similar strategies to improve schools. But the states considered here have both comprehensive improvement programs and several years of experience in identifying and assisting their lowest-performing schools. This experience may prove helpful to other states wrestling with similar issues.

Kentucky

The Kentucky Department of Education is required by law to identify any schools that have failed to make progress during the previous two years. A variety of data are used to do this. For example, the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) uses a nationally normed test in grades 3, 6, and 9 to assess students' abilities in reading, mathematics, and language arts, while the Kentucky Core Content Tests pose questions in

State	Report Card		Ratings Assigned			Sanctions Based on Ratings			Assistance for Low-Performing Schools			Targeted Assistance			
	School	District	All Schools	LP Only	# LP Schools	Close/Take Over	Repl Prin/ Teacher	Revoke Acc	LP School Rec Assist	On-site Team/All	On-site Team/Some	State Gives Xtra $ to All LPS	State Gives Xtra $ to Some	State Requires Res-Based	State Req PD
Alabama	x	x	x		150	x	x		x		x				x
Alaska	x	x	2002						2002						
Arizona	x	x													
Arkansas	x	x	2004			2004			2004						
California	x			x	3144				x		x		x		
Colorado	x		x		?		x		x				x		
Connecticut	x	x		x	28				x	x		x			
Delaware	x	x	x		?		x	x	x	x					
Florida	x	x	x		401				x	x			x		
Georgia	x	x	2002			2004			2002						
Hawaii	x														
Idaho															
Illinois	x		2002			2002			2002						
Indiana	x	x	x		39			x	x	x			x		
Iowa	x	x													
Kansas	x		x		3			x	x	x					
Kentucky	x		x		149				x		x		x		
Louisiana	x		x		57	x	x	x	x	x		x			
Maine	x	x													
Maryland	x	x		x	93	x	x		x	x		x			
Massachusetts	x	x		x	2		x		x	x		x			
Michigan	x	x	x		92	x	x	x	x	x					
Minnesota	x														
Mississippi	future	x	2002			2003			2002						
Missouri	x	x		x	?	x	x		x	x			x		
Montana															
Nebraska	x	x							x						
Nevada	x		x		10	x	x				x	x		x	
New Hampshire	x	x													
New Jersey	x								x						
New Mexico	x		x		25	x	x	x	x	2002	x			2002	2002
New York	x	x		x	105	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x
North Carolina	x	x	x		44	x	x				x				
North Dakota		x													
Ohio	x	x													
Oklahoma	x	x		x	25	x	x	x	x	x					
Oregon	x	x	x		47				x		x		x		
Pennsylvania	x	x													
Rhode Island	x	x		future					future						
South Carolina	x	x	x		?	x	x	x	x	x		x			x
South Dakota	x	x													
Tennessee	x	x		x	48	x		x	x		x		x		
Texas	x	x	x		146	x	x		x	x					
Utah	2003	x		2004					2004						
Vermont	x			x	39	x			x	x					x
Virginia	x		x		736			x	x	x				x	
Washington	x		future						future						
West Virginia	x	x	x		7		x		x	x			x		x
Wisconsin	x	x		x	223				x		x				
Wyoming	x	x													
Total	45	34	17	10	5613	14	16	11	27	17	9	7	9	3	5
Subset Total	13	11	9	2	1763	7	7	5	10	7	4	3	3	1	3

Table 1. *Quality Counts 2001* Data

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multiple-choice and open-response formats in six subjects. In addition, writing tests and portfolio scores are used. Data related to attendance, drop-out rates, and promotion and retention rates are also factored in. These data are combined into an index that allows comparison with prior years' indexes and growth projections. Each school is classified as "meets its goals," "progressing," or "in need of assistance." Schools in the "in need of assistance" category are further assigned to one of three levels, depending upon the severity of need, with Level III schools being the most needy. In 1999-2000, 149 schools were identified in this category.

All schools in the "in need of assistance" category are subject to an intense self-study and audit that examine performance on nine dimensions. The review is conducted by state-created scholastic audit teams, which include a highly skilled certified educator, a teacher, a principal or other administrator, a parent, and a university-based educator. The Kentucky Department of Education is required to assist schools in Level III, based on the results of the audit, while assistance *may* be provided to schools in Levels I and II at their request. Principals in all three levels are required to participate in additional staff development to enhance their leadership skills. Further, additional school improvement funds may be available to schools in all three levels.

The scholastic audit team includes a highly skilled certified educator, a teacher, a principal or other administrator, a parent, and a university-based educator.

Schools incorporate the results of the scholastic audit or review in their consolidated school plans. In addition, Level III schools receive the services of a highly skilled educator, originally called a distinguished educator, who is employed by the state department of education and who serves as an external facilitator of change. This person has previously demonstrated the ability to bring about high levels of student performance. One highly skilled educator is assigned to each Level III school and works with the principal and faculty to design and implement a school improvement plan. This plan is adopted for a two-year period. The department expects each skilled educator to serve on-site for at least 80 percent of the time, although occasionally the individual attends training events or other meetings.

An entry protocol lays out state expectations for the school that is to receive the highly skilled educator's services and spells out the relationship between this facilitator, the principal, and the faculty. These external facilitators provide a variety of services: staff development presentations, classroom observations of instruction, demonstration lessons, grant writing, tutoring, and creation of model lessons.

Highly skilled educators serving as external facilitators are not expected to evaluate teacher performance. This represents a change from earlier practice when distinguished educators were expected to evaluate teachers. The skilled external facilitator may, however, work with teachers who are experiencing difficulty, to ensure that the teacher's skills are brought up to an appropriate level.

Currently, 63 highly skilled educators are at work. They are placed on leave from their own school districts. Of these educators, approximately 25 are principals or other administrators. They are paid 135 percent of their salary, with a cap of $90,000. Salary paid above their home district level is not included in retirement benefits. The cost of the program influences the number of schools that can be served. Researchers who studied Kentucky reforms noted, "When 185 schools [up from 53] became eligible for the distinguished educator program in the second accountability cycle, the state was unable to provide the level of assistance that had proved so effective in the first cycle."[6]

The intention is for highly skilled educators to work for the state department of education for two years, but in some cases, this may be extended for a third year. These skilled educators participate in an intensive two-week training program, with follow-up provided at quarterly meetings. Topics covered in

training include personnel evaluation strategies, school-based decisionmaking, assessment practices, leading change, understanding poverty, technology applications, and educational and social psychology. Each skilled educator is provided with a laptop computer and printer. Mentors from the department provide advice and assistance in problem solving and help skilled educators in their own continuing professional growth and development.

The state provides staff development funds for all local education agencies. In 1999-2000, more than $15 million was spent on staff development, an average of $379 per teacher.

North Carolina

Every school in the state is evaluated annually along two dimensions: performance and growth. Performance is determined by the percentage of students in the school who score at or above grade level on tests of reading and mathematics (grades 3 through 8) and writing (grades 4 and 7) or, for high schools, the percentage of students scoring at or above grade level on tests in 10 subject areas. Growth is determined by comparing the amount of actual gain in tested areas with predictions of where students' performance should be. If schools attain the growth that is expected, they are described as "making expected growth," regardless of the performance score. If schools make 10 percent more than their expected growth, they are described as "making exemplary growth." Schools that have 50 percent or more of students performing on grade level but that do not achieve their expected growth are labeled as "no recognition." Finally, schools that fail to achieve their growth goals and that have fewer than 50 percent of students at grade level are identified as "low-performing schools."

Low-performing schools are assigned an external assistance team made up of one administrator and three or four teachers with experience at the grade-span level encompassed by the school being served.

The state's school assessment program has been in use for the past five years. During 2000-2001, major changes in the high school accountability program were introduced that expanded the number of courses included in the testing program and that introduced a system of predicting growth in these subject areas. In prior years, the performance of high school students on tests had been compared to performance of other students in previous years. The change to a growth prediction model for high schools brings them into line with the accountability model being used for elementary and middle schools.

Low-performing schools are assigned an external assistance team made up of one administrator and three or four teachers with experience at the grade-span level encompassed by the school being served. The team works with the school for one academic year (since, theoretically, the ratings are issued annually, and a low-performing school will receive a new designation at the end of the year). Assistance team members participate in a four-week training program that covers topics such as data analysis, cultural diversity, curriculum analysis and alignment, teacher performance evaluation, and team building. During 2001-2002, an additional two weeks of training in TESA—Teacher Expectations for Student Achievement--is being offered to assistance teams and to members of the state's Division of School Improvement, which is undertaking a major initiative focused on reducing the achievement gap between students of various ethnic groups. In addition, around 45 new assistance team members are joining about that same number who were already assigned to low-performing schools.

Depending upon available personnel resources, the state department of public instruction may offer assistance to schools that are not designated low-performing but that may be at risk of such a designation in the future. These "voluntary assistance teams" assist with demonstration lessons, coaching, and professional development on a limited basis in the schools they are assigned.

In low-performing schools, each assistance team is required to conduct a needs assessment of the school. The results are reported to the state and

incorporated in the school's improvement plan. The needs assessment requires that all educators in the school be evaluated by members of the assistance team. Educators whose performance is below standard are placed on improvement plans and assisted toward improvement by assistance team members. The team can recommend dismissal of any staff member whose performance does not improve sufficiently during the year.

The teams conduct in-class observations, lead instructional team meetings, assist with curriculum alignment projects, and conduct demonstration lessons. The team leader also works with the principal to ensure that schedules are supportive of school improvement, that budgets are appropriately allocated, and that the school culture is characterized by capacity to provide excellent education.

The state budgets $11.6 million for staff development for educators throughout the state ($146 per teacher). No additional funds are specifically earmarked for low-performing schools, although they may compete for school-improvement grants made available by the state.

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South Carolina

Although South Carolina has identified and helped to improve low-performing schools for several years, two important changes were made during the 2001-2002 school year. First, the system is transitioning from reliance on commercially prepared tests to greater reliance on a new state-created testing program. The new testing system—Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests, or PACT—is in use in grades 3 through 8 and includes measures of ability in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. In addition, a high school exit examination is used. It is anticipated that other measures, both at the student and at the school level, will be added over time.

Second, whereas only *districts* were rated prior to the 2001-2002 school year, *schools* are now rated individually and provided assistance, if appropriate. Each school is given three ratings. The first rating provides an absolute score, which indicates how students performed for the current year. The second rating gives an improvement score, indicating how students improved from the prior year. Finally, there is a composite score derived from the other two. Each of these scores is reported on a scale of 1 to 5. The possible categories are unsatisfactory, below average, average, good, and excellent. Because the state is committed to the notion of continuous improvement, there is no absolute standard for establishing categories of comparison. During 2001-2002, 74 schools are designated as unsatisfactory and are targeted by the state for improvement assistance.

The unsatisfactory schools are divided into three tiers and assigned different types of assistance, depending on their needs. Tier I schools, of which there are 10, and which are the most needy, receive a full-time principal leader. This person acts as a coach and mentor to the building principal. In addition, each of the Tier I schools receives a full-time curriculum specialist, who focuses on systems that support the development and implementation of the state curriculum. Also, each Tier I school receives teacher specialists on site at the rate of one per grade level (elementary schools) or one per content area (middle and high schools). These persons are expected to provide demonstration lessons, assist with classroom issues, and provide coaching for teachers. In addition, brokered services may be obtained from outside the district.

The 64 schools in the other two tiers receive somewhat less intense assistance. Tier II schools (32) are provided assistance through the state's Hub system, which provides technical assistance to schools throughout a specific geographic area. In addition, these schools receive a full-time curriculum specialist and teacher specialists on site. Tier III schools (32) are provided with direct technical assistance from the state department of education and may receive services available from on-site teacher specialists.

Currently, 7 principal leaders, 38 curriculum specialists, and 146 teacher specialists work in unsatisfactory schools. In addition, 6 persons serve in the state department's Office of Intervention and Assistance, and plans are to enlarge this staff to 17.

In addition, all schools needing assistance will receive an analysis conducted by the state's external review teams. These teams are made up of educators, university staff, school improvement council representatives, business and community people, and others. The teams conduct an analysis focused on four areas: curriculum and instruction, leadership and governance, student performance, and professional development. A final report is generated for each school, which contains recommendations for improvement in each focus area. With state board of education approval of the final reports, an improvement plan is developed and implemented.

Principal leaders and curriculum specialists assigned to low-performing schools receive one week of training. Topics covered include curriculum alignment, data analysis, school improvement planning, understanding the Baldrige criteria (a national standard for excellence), strategic planning, curriculum, developing professional development programs, mentoring and coaching, media relations, and academic planning for students.

Although the emphasis throughout the process is on building capacity in low-performing schools, the external review team can recommend personnel changes if deemed appropriate.

The state budgets $7 million for staff development ($159 per teacher). An additional $3.2 million is allotted to the Science and Math Hubs for curriculum and staff development. Schools deemed unsatisfactory can also apply for noncompetitive grants that support additional staff development through the Retraining Grant Program. About $750,000 has been reserved for this purpose.

Although the emphasis . . . is on building capacity in low-performing schools, the external review team can recommend personnel changes if deemed appropriate.

Similarities Among Approaches

While the school assessment and improvement systems in Kentucky, North Carolina, and South Carolina are unique, these states share some similarities:

Identifying Schools

All spent time and effort in preparatory activities. Each of the states developed goals and standards for schools and for students well in advance of implementing a school assessment program. These curriculum goals usually incorporated standards (both of opportunity to learn and of level of success) established by the relevant professional educator association (e.g., National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, International Reading Association).

All developed comprehensive student testing systems that are highly correlated with state curriculum goals. Only one of the three states—Kentucky—continues to use a nationally normed test as part of its testing program. In this case, the test is administered only in selected grades and counts for a relatively small part of the overall school rating. In each of the states, a state-developed testing program is in place. Interestingly, the states' testing programs all include open-ended questions, performance tests, and/or portfolios of students' work, in addition to more traditional multiple-choice tests. In each state, elementary and middle school students are tested in at least writing, reading, and mathematics. In Kentucky and South Carolina, a much broader range of curriculum is tested.

All adopted a more rigorous standard of student performance than had been required under their previous testing systems. The states, it should be mentioned, require that virtually *all* students participate in the testing program, rather than sampling *some* students in a few grades. Some limited exemp-

tions from testing are available, however, for students for whom English is not the native language and who are new to the school, and for those enrolled in the state's schools for a relatively short period of time. Importantly, however, the testing programs align with an intellectually rigorous standards-based curriculum.

None relies exclusively on test scores for assessing schools. Each of the school evaluation systems includes additional measures of school success, such as attendance rates, drop-out rates, and student promotion rates. This provides valuable recognition of the fact that schools are expected to do more than teach the three R's. Students are expected to make reasonable progress and to stay in school until they earn a diploma. In two of the states examined here—North Carolina and South Carolina—the progress that students make is as important as the absolute scores they make on tests.

Interestingly, the states' testing programs all include open-ended questions, performance tests, and/or portfolios of students' work, in addition to more traditional multiple-choice tests.

Each has changed important parts of its school assessment system, based on experience. In general, these changes have tended to more tightly align the testing program with the unique situation presented by the state and its schools. For example, North Carolina recently replaced the former high school assessment model, which was based on comparison of different cohorts of students, with a system that predicts growth for 10 high school courses. Each of the states relies on fairly sophisticated statistical procedures for translating student test results into school assessments. Unfortunately, these statistical models are often poorly understood by educators and parents throughout the states. This lack of understanding of the models can lead to a lack of confidence in the outcomes of the assessments.

Kentucky, North Carolina, and South Carolina, then, have managed to unify the curriculum that is intended to guide the education of all students with a system for measuring the degree to which individual schools bring this about. Moreover, each of these assessment systems incorporates improvement as an organizational goal for schools. It is not enough for a school to do "okay." Rather, in these states, schools must continuously seek to improve their performance in order to continue to meet the state's expectations.

Assisting Schools

Each of the three states also approaches assistance to low-performing schools in similar ways.

All rely on the expertise of educators from outside the home district of the low-performing school to bring about improvements. Education, it has been said, is all about relationships between people. Therefore, it is not surprising that these three states rely on expert educators to help other educators improve their practice. It should be observed that great reliance for improvement is invested in the practical wisdom and experience of these expert educators. First-hand, state-specific knowledge about the day-to-day realities of school reform is more highly prized by these improvement systems than is expert knowledge dispensed from universities or packaged programs based on research.

All require a preliminary needs assessment process. In two of the three states—Kentucky and South Carolina—this needs assessment procedure is highly formalized and involves individuals who will not have an ongoing role in the school's improvement efforts. In North Carolina, the needs assessment procedure is less formal and is conducted by the assistance team assigned to the low-performing school. In any case, each of the states recognizes that test scores and other measures may indicate *that* a school is low-performing, but scores alone cannot tell *why* the school is low-performing.

All assume that the schools possess sufficient resources to educate students but may need supplemental funding to support some school improvement efforts. Within the three states, large percentages of local school operating budgets come from the

state, usually in some formula-driven way. None of the states automatically increases the funding to low-performing schools, choosing instead to focus on how the available resources are being used. However, assistance in securing additional funds, often through competitive grants, is provided.

All require that the performance of educators in the low-performing school be evaluated. This is a highly contentious issue, and the states have struggled with an equitable way to deal with it. In North Carolina, there was originally a requirement that teachers in low-performing schools take a test to establish adequate content knowledge and that members of assistance teams evaluate classroom performance. In Kentucky, external facilitators were initially expected to evaluate teachers' performance. This responsibility for evaluation often places a barrier of distrust between the members of the external team and the educators that they are supposed to support. While these states struggle with how to measure teacher effectiveness, each of the states recognizes the need for highly skilled teachers to work in schools, and each of the states provides money for staff development.

All emphasize local capacity building as a primary ingredient in helping low-performing schools become successful. Each of these states is required to help with school improvement, but clearly, each believes that such improvement is ultimately the responsibility of the school. Therefore, there is a reliance on external (to the district) school improvement teams to carry out much of the work needed, with state department of education staff fulfilling a supportive role. However, the time frames in which state assistance is provided is relatively short, ranging from one to two school years. Whether this is sufficient time to bring about systemic improvements in schools or to build capacity is unclear, although each of the states claims that all assisted schools have made improvements in student achievement, some of which are quite impressive.

. . . test scores and other measures may indicate *that* a school is low-performing, but scores alone cannot tell *why* the school is low-performing.

The states described in this policy brief, then, have invested heavily in the creation of curriculum frameworks and standards, testing programs or other measurement systems, and training of school personnel. Each emphasizes the notions of continuous improvement and capacity building throughout its improvement assistance efforts. While some states require a thorough needs analysis process guided by experts from outside the school, others have a less-formal needs evaluation requirement. Each of the states relies on the use of expert practicing educators who are external to the school as a keystone of the improvement strategy. While the number of such experts assigned to each low-performing school varies from state to state, and while the specific responsibilities are somewhat different, clearly the state interventions rely on an infusion of highly skilled people external to the site who will assist their colleagues in low-performing schools to change their current practice. Most importantly, each of the states has established a record of success. In most cases, low-performing schools do benefit from the assistance offered by the states. In at least some cases, the improvement is insufficient to lift the school out of the low-performing category, but in other cases, the schools have moved to the highest level of performance recognized by the accountability system in use.[7]

Policy Issues to Address

Regardless of the approach taken to assisting low-performing schools, several issues confront policymakers who seek to raise the level of performance of low-performing schools.

Clarity About Goals

Depending upon the perspective of any given individual, different goal sets for school improvement efforts may be emphasized. For example, the goal of policymakers and of low-performing schools may be to raise test scores. Indeed, state department of education officials in each of the three states reviewed here report that improved test scores have been observed in many of the low-performing schools that have been assisted. This is accepted as *prima facie* evidence that the school assistance programs have been successful and that educational improvements have been made. However, many of these improvements do not appear to result from deep thinking about education by members of the low-performing school faculty. For example, McDiarmid and Corcoran report that, in Kentucky, most teacher-planned staff development activities focused on relatively minor teaching and learning problems and specifically on improving students' test-taking skills.[8]

The members of the assistance teams and officials of the departments of education sponsoring them appear to hold a different set of goals from policymakers and low-performing schools. These department representatives appear to believe that their real mission is to "build capacity" in the school so that good education will continue to be offered when the team has withdrawn. They want external assistance teams to ensure continuous progress or improvement in the school. In most cases, these external assistance teams are assigned to schools for only one year. The research literature on capacity building is fairly clear. It is a long-term, coordinated undertaking. In describing the effort to create capacity in New York City's District 2, Elmore and Burney[9] observe that instructional improvement is a long, multistage process involving awareness, planning, implementation, and reflection. Fullan observes that local capacity building is the result of policy development, training, and ongoing support.[5]

A number of researchers and educators advance a third set of goals. They assert that the goal of any school improvement should be the re-creation of schools and districts so they are able to make profound differences in students. The key to long-lasting reform is viewed as resting on "re-culturing" low-performing schools so that they approach their mission in a different way. Re-culturing has to do with changing expectations for students, certainly, but it has more to do with changing expectations of the adults in the building so they will increasingly see themselves as capable of delivering high-quality education to all students; see their students as capable of performing intellectually rigorous, high-caliber work; and recognize the role of families and communities in carrying out the mission of the school.[5,10]

Re-culturing . . . has more to do with changing expectations of the adults in the building so they will increasingly . . . see their students as capable of performing intellectually rigorous, high-caliber work. . . .

It appears that there are finite amounts of energy and resources for school improvement. Therefore, policymakers must be clear at the outset of the reform efforts about the goals that are to be achieved. On the one hand, goals must be seen by school people as attainable and, on the other hand, goals must be perceived by the public as important. The higher the goal set, the more determination there must be to stay the course. Agreement about goals has long been seen as one of the correlates of effective schools.[11] In order to marshal the long-term support needed, policymakers need to create a goal set that all stakeholders can support.

Time Needed for Change

Low-performing schools did not become low performing in one or two years, nor will they be able to turn themselves around in significant ways in one year or two years. It is true that state assistance has been able to help many low-performing schools improve, if, by "improve," we mean, "get test scores up." However, Fullan[3] points out that there is no guarantee that initial success will last. There may be strong implementation of an improved program, but there may not be strong institutionalization. It is interesting to note that most of the research on school improvement indicates that 3 to 5 years are required for schools to bring about significant improvements.[3,12]

Each of the states in our sample understands that capacity building for continuous improvement is necessary if a school is to avoid low performance. This capacity building does, indeed, take time. Yet most systems for assisting low-performing schools deliver such intensive assistance for one or two years. In Kentucky, researchers reported that, "Although the distinguished educator(s) had an impact beyond improving test scores, it is not clear whether their two-year presence in the schools will have a long-term effect on school culture."[13] Since two years may not be sufficient time for deep change, it is crucial to remember that most students can not be expected to wait while their school becomes more effective. Therefore, a combination of short-term improvements and long-term changes appears to be the key for schools.

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Policymakers need to determine appropriate roles and time frames for improvement. It may very well be that intensive assistance, in the form of comprehensive needs assessments followed by the work of assistant teams, should be seen as the first phase in a multistep process. Transferring responsibility for continuing improvement activities to school districts, with local boards and superintendents held responsible for providing and reporting on continuing improvement efforts, would constitute a second phase. This would provide a longer term for change activities, with the final phase being the devolution of responsibility for maintaining improvements to the (formerly) low-performing school. This multiphase plan has the advantage of providing short-term resources to overcome the initial inertia experienced by many low-performing schools, followed by longer term support for continuing improvement efforts undertaken locally, where responsibility for education ultimately resides.

Good People; Poor Practice

While most audits or reviews of schools include personnel evaluation, most states appear reluctant to dismiss staff. Given the shortage of available personnel to teach and lead schools in many states and districts, this reluctance is understandable. Moreover, there appears to be a widespread belief that most educators are people doing the best they can, so improvement hinges on teaching them new approaches to the jobs they do, rather than relieving them of their responsibilities. Thus, the effort is made to change the culture of the failing organization while minimizing changes in the staff.

While it is true that local boards of education must take responsibility for removing teachers and other staff who are unable or unwilling to demonstrate professional practice at an acceptable level, it is equally true that wholesale firings of school faculty are unlikely and unnecessary. Heavy investment of time and money in staff development programs geared toward providing both new skill sets as well as a new vision of what competent teachers do will be necessary before there can be the reculturing that many education reformers feel is needed. Such staff development should include what we know are the features of excellent professional development, including clear goals, mentors and job coaches for all

teachers and principals, and follow-up assistance to ensure that progress is being made. Certainly many of the current models of staff development—those that present staff development as an event rather than a process—are unlikely to lead to successful change in practice.

Low-Performing Schools: The Exception, Not the Rule

While some states evaluate districts as well as schools, the experience of the states described here is that poor-performing schools are anomalies within districts that serve their communities reasonably well. There appears to be no need to sanction the entire district for the failure of a few schools. The question then is, why does the system work well for most schools yet fail to turn around a few low-performing schools within a district? How can districts themselves take on the task of ensuring that all its schools are competent? Since the assistance from the state is intended to be temporary, the district itself may need to develop the capacity to reform low-performing schools. According to Larry Cuban, "In concentrating single-mindedly on school-site reform, federal, state, and local advocates of whole school reform have ignored or neglected the crucial role that districts play in creating and sustaining improved schooling."[12]

Part of the solution to the problem of sustaining school improvement may require re-examining the issue of low school performance in terms of the local school community, not the entire school district. If the community at large is able to embrace the low-performing school and to support improvement efforts, then the possibility of success is enhanced. Change mandated from the top cannot be sustained over the long haul. While the state may have an important role to play in identifying low-performing schools and providing initial and intensive assistance, the needed long-term changes can be provided only by the home district and community.[9] Worthwhile improvement activities include teaching the community that low-performing schools are not an acceptable option and teaching the local board of education and district that they have a responsibility (and the power) to sustain improvement activities. Such efforts have a ripple effect, and can ultimately lead to sustained changes that ensure that every child attends a school that can educate him or her well. A parent in Kentucky has said, "I don't think any one group can do it alone. I don't think the principals or superintendents can. The teachers and parents certainly can't. I think it's going to take a lot of people working together and appreciating the skills of one another."[14]

Message to Policymakers

What, then, can legislators, state department of education officials, and those who are concerned about helping low-performing schools improve learn from the experiences of others who have sought to turn around such schools? While there are many lessons to be learned, these appear to be particularly important:

- ◇ **Define school success and how such success can be demonstrated.** There is no universally accepted definition of school success. Some states accept student growth as evidence of success, while others use a demonstrated performance criterion. Defining school success in a way that is both politically and technically acceptable is a crucial first step for policymakers.
- ◇ **Create strategies at the state, local, and school level that can be deployed to bring about school improvement.** Traditional relationships among state departments of education, local districts and schools, state governments, and colleges and universities are complicated and cannot be ignored in devising improvement strategies. However, these complexities and traditions should not be used as an excuse to tolerate inaction. There is enough work for everyone. All available resources should be considered when working to bring about school improvement.

◇ **Recognize the value—but insufficiency—of short-term successes.** One of the common responses to being identified as a low-performing school is a pervasive sense of shame, a sense that educators and communities are eager to overcome. If, however, sincere efforts at improvement do not meet with some success early, it is likely that people will give up on the improvement activities and will work to find fault with the system that has labeled the school "low-performing." Short-term success has great motivational power, but it usually is not enough to bring about profound improvements.

◇ **Commit for the long haul.** Most state government bodies work on one- or two-year budget cycles that often determine the life of policy. Even when legislation has no specified end date, the legislature must appropriate continuation funding every year or two to support the policy and related programs. Thus, a reform program enacted by one legislature could be gutted, or go unfunded, by a subsequent legislature. A long-term commitment, however, needs to be made by state departments of education, local boards of education, and communities.

◇ **Help communities accept responsibility for maintaining school success.** Communities must be helped to understand that low-performing schools are everyone's responsibility and that community members can support school improvement efforts in meaningful ways. For example, individuals and organizations can publicly express support and appreciation for teachers, administrators, and students; provide supplementary resources; and volunteer their time or expertise. Educating community members about what they have to offer is vital.

◇ **Recognize that school success rests on the power and skill of educators.** In the end, school improvement will be brought about by the teachers and administrators working in schools. Recognizing their needs and strengths is a crucial aspect of school improvement. Ignoring or blaming these people for past failure is unlikely to bring about the kind of schools that every child is entitled to attend.

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